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AMERICA'S CRACKED MIRROR: THE THEATRE IN OUR SOCIETY

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Editor's Preview: Originally delivered during a seminar sponsored by the Center for Constructive Alternatives on theatre and the arts, this address by Dr. Raymond Pentzell is a beautifully written and thoughtful commentary on the role both play in preserving or destroying our culture. He reminds us, as the title of this presentation suggests, that our culture reflects the condition of our society, that "we live in culture as fish live in water," and so our dependency upon it is very real indeed.

Perhaps the American theatre has never been what it ought to be. Alexis de Tocqueville began his discussion of the arts in the American democracy of the 1830s with daunting directness: "Thus the democratic principle not only tends to direct the human mind to the useful arts, but it induces the artisan to produce with great rapidity many imperfect commodities, and the consumer to content himself with these commodities." As Tocqueville goes on to apply this principle variously to the specific fine arts, including drama, we recognize at once our continuing habits of meretriciousness, sentimentality, and ephemeral or ill-considered "relevance"; our striving for immediate emotional effect over tempered understanding of matter and manner; and even our preference for the easily recognizable, or superficially "realistic," over tested (or testable) canons of expressive form.

Still, to read Tocqueville is not to abandon hope. As he acknowledges, the art of theatre is inherently democratic. An event created collaboratively, shared with a crowd, and thus "living" only in the sight and hearing of that crowd, cannot *ipso facto* indulge the private, the recondite, or even the unusually refined. Theatre is preeminently a social art, indeed a political art. Tocqueville's antithesis of "democratic" and "aristocratic" art can never equate, in the theatre, simply with higher or lower merit. Tocqueville, a true Frenchman of Victor Hugo's era, uses the taste for the "Greek classics" as a shibboleth for the "aristocratic." But of course the monuments of ancient Greek theatrical art were achieved in a democracy, and Greece's great dramatic achievement virtually ended with the fall of that democracy.



In the abstract, then, "democracy" cannot explain America's disappointing showing in theatrical art. Nor, really, can we blame our indigenous Calvinism, which first outlawed, then disguised, and always distrusted the theatrical professions. That prejudice ceased to be culturally normative before the Civil War, whatever its aftereffects. Nor can we accuse—although here we may be getting warmer—the broad tendency of the individualistic Romantic movement, throughout the West, to realign the role of the artist in society: Where once the artist was society's spokesman, now, since the turn of the nineteenth century, he has become its accusing prophet. Despite the collaborative, social nature of the theatre (which naturally militates against the Romantic role of the artist), the artist-as-adversary began to mount the stage in the 1880s. The upshot, overall, has been tension, but not necessarily a collapse of the bond between artist and audience, at least until quite recently.

Two questions: If the American theatre is a mess, why bother with it at all? And if it is worth bothering about,

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what, at root, is wrong with it?—for surely a nation's theatrical art cannot be “fixed” by tinkering with the flotsam of fashion or even by occasional genius: we must look for flaws endemic to its role in our culture, spread among not only its artists but its financial backers and its audiences as well. Only through radical reassessment can we hope to find correctives.

Well, *why* bother?—Because we live in a culture as fish live in water, and the theatre, by its very “democratic” and “political” nature, remains the quintessential art to be grasped in a broadly cultural reference. In ways not at once apparent in our own debased culture of nihilism, pseudo-Freudian self-absorption, and suicidal Gadarene manias, the theatre is normally conservative: The immediacy and collectivity of the audience, as well as the high capital investment needed for production, urge theatre toward greater comprehensibility, and even accep-

tability, to the society at large than may be the case with, say, poetry or the visual arts. Even that which is “new-and-different” in the theatre has already filtered through many sensibilities; even its “avant-garde” is relatively cautious. This ought to be a virtue, not a failing—but only insofar as the theatre’s “conservatism” takes the form of recurrent return to the core values of its society, in order to express them and re-express them by means of unflagging re-examination of the culture’s deepest and most living icons.

My use of the term “icon” is based on that of C. S. Lewis, in *An Experiment in Criticism*; by “icon” I mean something broader than “a religious picture as strictly defined by the Eastern Churches,” yet something narrower than “a figural representation” or “a picture of something recognizable.” The “iconic,” usefully understood, is a nexus of concrete symbolism that is both culturally sanctified and deeply meaningful. It is neither, on one hand, mere cliché or stereotype nor, on the other hand, an idiosyncratic fantasy. Psychologically, shared icons are the common currency of what Carl Jung revered as “archetypes.” In narrative art, icons extend into true “myth.” The important note is that an icon is culturally *available* to any single artist, already there, replete with its own meanings and its own emotive potential. It is indeed a part of the culture itself, and does not need, or seem to need, any one artist to “create” it. As Lewis tells us:

its purpose is, not to fix attention upon itself, but to stimulate and liberate certain activities in . . . the worshipper. . . . A crucifix exists in order to direct the worshipper's thoughts and affections to the Passion. It had better not have any excellencies, subtleties, or originalities which will fix attention upon itself. Hence devout people may, for this purpose, prefer the crudest and emptiest icon. The emptier, the more permeable; and they want, as it were, to pass through the material image and go beyond.

For Lewis, an icon is an artifact but not, strictly speaking, a work of fine art. His contrast of an icon's purpose and effect with the purpose and effect of an artist's “creative” work is instructive: for the “creative or “original” artwork:

Real appreciation demands the opposite process. We must not let loose our own subjectivity upon the pictures and make them its vehicles. We must begin by laying aside as completely as we can all our own preoccupations, interests, and associations. We must make room for Botticelli's Mars and Venus, or Cimabue's Crucifixion, by emptying out our own. After the negative effort, the positive. We must use our eyes. We must look, and go on looking till we have certainly seen exactly what is there. We sit down before a picture in order to have something done to us, not that we may do things with it. The first demand any work of art makes upon us is surrender.

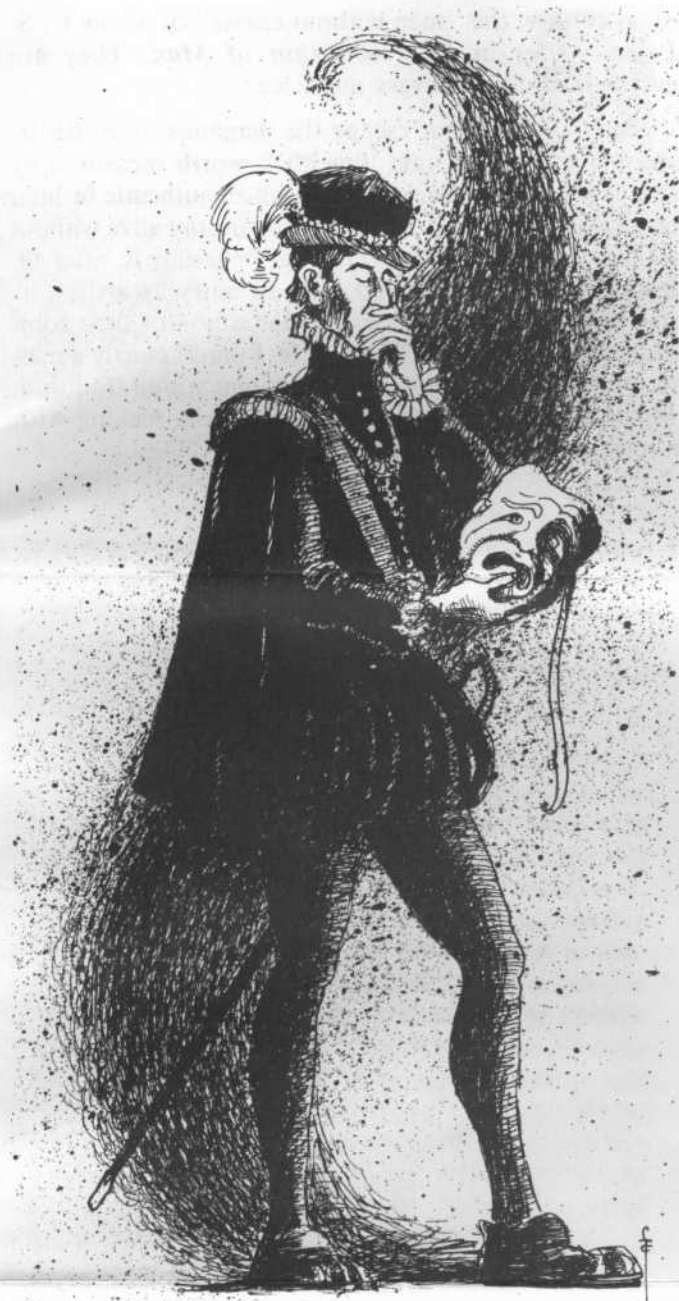
We may place this contrast between “icon” and “aesthetic object” in the following context: All art functions rhetorically; that is, it exhibits an intrinsic purpose directed toward an audience. An artwork communicates, irrespective of how strongly or how consciously the artist wishes it to. This is obvious in theatrical art, with its

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Editor's Note: The following information was omitted from the October issue. Our apologies to Mr. Armentano:

Dominick T. Armentano: Dr. Armentano is Professor of Economics at the University of Hartford. He received his Ph.D. in Economics from the University of Connecticut. His teaching areas include antitrust economics and law, government regulation of business, energy economics, money and banking and business and society in the MBA program. He has lectured widely to business and academic audiences, both in the United States and abroad. He has authored many books on economics, the most recent of which is *Antitrust and Monopoly: Anatomy of a Policy Failure*. He serves on the advisory boards for the Center For the Defense of Free Enterprise and the Council for a Competitive Economy. Dr. Armentano was a recipient of the 1980 Leavey Foundation Award for Excellence in Private Enterprise Education presented by the Freedoms Foundation at Valley Forge.



live-and-present audience. There are four basic rhetorical functions, and any theatrical artwork will manifest at least one or as many as four, in various proportions. These functions we may call the "aesthetic," the "iconic," the "didactic," and the "ironic." They exist in a hierarchy of alternatives.

Every artwork may stimulate aesthetic response: It arouses the audience's feelings; it invites contemplation of formal beauty; and as a result of both it may, as Aristotle proposes, bring about a therapeutic change in the audience's mental and emotional balance, a "purgation" of some kind. But taken by itself, the aesthetic function places a premium on newness—originality of perception, novelty of form, the appeal of the strange and inviting, that which, as Lewis points out, asks us to

enter into a new experience on the artwork's own terms, not on ours.

The aesthetic function may, however, be balanced or partially reversed by the iconic, which necessarily appeals to the familiar, the deeply rooted, the traditional—the very opposite of novelty. Even Cimabue's Crucifixion is, after all, a picture of *the* Crucifixion. Thornton Wilder wrote that good theatre brings about Platonic "recollection," the state in which one realizes, "This is the way things are. I have always known it without being fully aware that I knew it. Now, in the presence of this play. . . I know I know it." The iconic function is both celebratory and reverent, at its strongest tapping the depths of what the audience as a whole keeps sacred (for neither celebration nor true reverence is possible for an individual estranged from his *communitas*). It may be noted that America has not had a first-rate dramatist working this vein since Thornton Wilder himself.

Of our other two rhetorical functions we may merely observe that the didactic marshals icons as well as articulated arguments to the specific intent of persuasion: of "teaching" a new or previously ignored idea, or of "teaching" an old idea still accepted but gone slack in the audience's consciousness. The didactic, in bending icons to its own "message," may at times pervert them, as we see, for instance, when propagandists set out to "apply" the rooted imagery of Jeffersonian democracy (the yeoman farmer, the town meeting) to fundamentally Marxist programs. In any case, didacticism ultimately addresses the decisionmaking mind and the will, even if it does so through mob-enthusiasm; whereas the iconic, taken in itself, addresses the more profound pieties of the subconscious, the habitual, the long-conditioned, the seemingly instinctive.

Finally, the rhetorical function we call "ironic" is that which casts doubts on the audience's icons, calls their meaning into question or undermines them. In other words, it is iconoclastic, spotlighting icons' internal or mutual contradictions, or picking out incongruities between an icon and the audience's presumed experience of ordinary reality. "Black comedy," "pessimistic satire," and "absurdism" are a few of the theatrical forms that emphasize an ironic rhetoric.

All this business about rhetorical functions and "icons" may seem the pedantry of a professional academic who has tormented some critical ideas of Aristotle, Goethe, and Kenneth Burke into a tangle of irrelevant distinctions. But go to almost any American theatre and ask yourself, "What is the point of this new play?" Or: "What does this new play seem to want to do for me?" Most of the time you will answer, "It is meant to be entertaining," by which you probably mean that it "works" to the extent that it "takes you out of your own life for a while and puts you into somebody else's," or else you mean that it tries to excite and stimulate you, or shock you, or relax you, or even depress you. In other

words, you are saying that the play has an aesthetic function merely, whether or not it succeeds in fulfilling it.

Once in a while you will answer your question by acknowledging that the play is trying to persuade or convince you of something: the didactic function. And sometimes you will recognize that the play is trying to make mincemeat out of something you thought you respected: the ironic function. These are all, in themselves, honorable functions. In any proportion of emphasis, they may be discerned easily in anyone's list of the world's greatest drama. By the same token, any of them may be debased: The merely aesthetic may descend to comfortable inanity, to voyeurism, to senseless thrills-and-chills, or to pornography. The didactic may descend to hoodwinking, incitement to riot, distortion of history, or silly pep-rallying. And the ironic may descend to cynical frivolity, to nihilism, or, indeed, to Satanism.

What is missing is the element of icon, of archetype, of authentic myth. Indeed, it is this function that may, if present, *prevent* the other three functions from descending to their respective nadirs. How often can we answer our question, "What does this new play do for me?" by whispering softly, with Thornton Wilder, "This is the way things *are*"—really, ultimately are—and "I have always known it," in some deep recess of memory older than my years, older than my country's history or older even than our civilization's history, and yet (and this is a crucial point) not *only* a memory but a meaning present in symbols that I have been staring at, almost blindly, every day of my life?

I am quite aware that many playwrights went through the fad, in the late '60s and '70s, of toying portentously with myth, ritual, and archetype, usually fluttering the veils of the pseudo-primitive. Yet at the very height of that fashion, the notion that a deeply rooted icon can be a functioning imaginative symbol in our *own* culture, a living, shape-changing, but potentially immortal symbol still at work in twentieth-century America, was usually ignored in favor of a superficial appeal to the exotic, to the outmoded conjectures of Victorian anthropologists about pre-classical religious rites, and to bizarre customs collected from the uplands of New Guinea. We, the audience, became connoisseurs of the archetypal: titillated, thrilled, shocked, or bored by icons that were not our icons, but the artists' (if indeed they were anyone's)—in other words, a purely, narrowly aesthetic approach, by which we may have been affected, but *to* which we did not contribute from our own imagination, and *in* which we did not participate as members of a common, coherent culture.

Contrast a dramatic example very close to Lewis's "crude" and "empty" crucifix: In 1601 a pious nobleman in southern Poland ceded a large tract of land to a group of Bernardine friars, for the purpose of creating a site for an annual Passion Play. By 1609 the landscape was dotted with two dozen small chapels, each one dedicated to a single event in the suffering and death of

Christ, each one fronted by a stage or plaza for performance of the assigned episode. The entire route of the enactment measured about six miles. In that year, 1609, the Passion Play began to be performed every Holy Week by the local townspeople and peasants. It is still being performed yearly, in pretty much the same way. It has not changed to accommodate more sophisticated ideas of what is proper to "religious drama" or of what will attract foreign tourists, as has happened at Oberammergau in Bavaria. Photographs show the Polish Passion Play to be, by modern, urban standards, a bit tawdry and amateurish. Yet every year as many as fifty thousand Poles attend the single performance. They arrive by bus and car and foot, and they sleep in their cars or in the few damp and overcrowded inns or in wet tents. And they move, *en masse* and with chancy opportunities to see and hear any one scene, over the six miles of mud in the course of the week-long performance. They cry. They pray. When the actor of Christ drags his cross through a creek, pious women swarm to fill bottles with water from the place he just stepped. At the Crucifixion scene thousands prostrate themselves in the sodden field.

Now, these people know very well that that is not the "actual" Crucifixion; they know that this "Christ" is only an amateur actor and that the stream is not in Jerusalem and that the water in their bottles is not even the blessed "Holy Water" they can get in any church. They are every bit as aware as you or I would be that this is a play, an enactment, and perhaps not even an especially skillful one. But, in Lewis's term, the performance is "permeable"; the fifty thousand pilgrims "pass through" it to confront—emotionally, intellectually, and in the deeper regions of piety that I have already mentioned—the central event of their corporate heritage.

That is Poland, of course—where the Pope comes from. Where the word "solidarity" is anything but a buzz-word. What is the nearest that we might expect—or wish—in our own pluralistic, abundant, cosmopolitan, comparatively free and individualistic culture? I wish I knew. Certainly our artists and their financial backers do not seem to know. And vast numbers of our actual or potential audience members not only do not know, but do not even suppose that any kind of theatre anywhere might really articulate such a broad and deep cultural bond.

At this point I must make it clear that I do not advocate a conversion of the American theatre to an approach exclusively iconic, iconic simply, "crude," "empty," entirely "permeable." Even if it were possible (which it is not, on the scale of national, educated, "high" culture in this era), I would certainly not wish to see devalued or suppressed the formal beauty, creativity, or psychological equilibrium fostered by an aesthetic emphasis; nor the duel of dialectic focused by a didactic thrust; nor the wit and candor—the deflating of pretension, hypocrisy, stupidity, and sentimentality—necessary to any intelligent ironic viewpoint. My concern is that the

iconic function of theatre seems nowadays to be missing entirely, and like a car with one flat tire, the American theatre may be wobbling laterally toward a roadside ditch. Where are the traditional images, the focal, meaning-laden symbols that bond our culture? Bond it not only geographically and politically and socially but also historically, "diachronically," back through our forebears here and abroad, back in a widening, then narrowing gyre that gathers into its spiral Europe and Asia and Africa, Christianity and Judaism and Hellenism, the men in the forests and the men who first thought up the pyramids? Any fool of a playwright, actor, or director can arouse and manipulate animal feelings of pain or comfort or lust; can formulate deracinated experiences of despair or blind optimism. Any journeyman verbalist can construct a harangue for or against some contrived "ideology," whether dull or demented. And anyone with eyes to see can ironically undermine the totems of America's "junk culture" and its shallow *aficionados*. Without discovering, without profoundly appreciating, our culture's true core of icons, there is nothing worth even being sceptical about. What then is to *stop* an artist from monkeying with mannerism, playing at punkery, fiddling with flotsam?

It is not as though our people recognize no icons. Nor is it that iconic rhetoric has no nadir, no banality of its own. Just as *aesthesis* can degenerate to the level of sensation, so also may a cultural icon, stupidly or conventionally perceived, degenerate to a mere stereotype of melodrama. But we are not proposing that good drama can be made inevitable; that has never been possible. We are speaking of its nourishment. Generations accustomed to the bombast and flat moral antitheses of Victorian melodrama were not getting much besides good craftsmanship, a democratic taste for the icons of popular culture, and a pleasant habituation to obvious virtues. Yet they were also getting the right preparation to discover the vastly superior poetry and psychological insight of a Shakespeare. Today, a child growing up with TV sitcoms and music-video is getting bad craftsmanship, no moral center, and preparation not for worthwhile dramatic literature of any kind, but only for more TV sitcoms, more music-video, later perhaps some "post-modern" or "deconstructionist" theatre, and finally idiocy—in its fine Greek etymology that means "cut off," "shut within oneself," unwilling and finally unable to share in any human culture at all.

It should go without saying that classical myth and biblical narrative include our civilization's most penetrating icons. It should follow that any Western culture that cannot send its dramatic poets to those sources again and again, and expect them to return with ever-new, ever-powerful perspectives on them, has, flatly, fallen into barbarism or idiocy. About specifically American icons there need be no mystery; you can come up with your own examples: the striking, at times numinous, figures and episodes of our history, our historical legends,

our folklore, and our classic novels and poems—figures which themselves reincarnate motifs that are ultimately timeless. True, even a simple acquaintance with this fund of imagery and its value-saturated significances can no longer be taken for granted. The proverbial "every schoolboy knows" no longer applies, not after a couple of decades of radical "revisionism" in historical studies and a classroom emphasis on "structures" at the expense of narrative and illustration. But the icons themselves have not been lost. It is possible that the act of rediscovering them will stimulate our artists to better effect than would the naïve assumption of their readiness-to-hand. The artists, after all, must be moved by them, moved to explore and revivify them with every facet of their creative imagination at the peak of receptive awareness. Let us hope for the best—hope at least for another Robert Lowell, who might give us new works to equal Lowell's *Old Glory* trilogy of 1964.

I have, you see, been generalizing about a *status quo* in playwriting, a sort of petrified trend, and not concerning myself with the occasional play that suggests that even a petrified trend may be bucked. What is more, I have bypassed the theatre in its larger reference, the acting companies, the communities, the buildings, and the producing and funding organizations that make theatre theatre, not a branch of literature. But not long ago I was talking to a friend who writes criticism for a New York newspaper. He is a longtime authority on America's regional repertory companies. He made a nice point. "You're saying that the American theatre can't find its soul," he said. "All right, go ahead. But don't complain that its body isn't getting healthier, because it is."

I believe him. After a long period that seemed like a death-coma, the American theatre has emerged from a chrysalis, a pupa-state—emerged not as a butterfly, surely, but at least as a living bug of *some* species. The shucked-off cocoon represents, among other things, the primacy of Broadway as an artistic leader, and the one-show-at-a-time commercial venture as the standard mode of theatrical production. By now, even government funding may no longer be necessary to sustain a good stage company. Today, a well-managed, businesslike repertory company in a sizeable city can retrieve well over two-thirds of its operating expenses from the box office alone, and nearly all of the rest from voluntary, local patronage by individuals and corporations. It can do so, as several regional companies have demonstrated, with an artistically respectable repertory of new plays, classics, and revivals—without, in other words, pandering to a lowest common denominator of taste that would be equally served by dinner-theatres and network television.

Are there then no problems in this "body" of the theatre, as it seems slowly to grow healthier? Far from it. If, on one hand, a stable, professional company does not need to descend to pop-junk, it remains true, on the other hand, that few such companies dare to pick plays that run counter to the year's fashion—and there are

mass-culture, the "men without chests" of whom C. S. Lewis writes in *The Abolition of Man*. They are everywhere, and in every audience.

Simply, we cannot escape the demands of worth by chasing mere economic "health": worth measured by standards of ethical truth, intelligence, authentic feeling, or artistic form. Yet a theatre that can stay alive without sinking to a diet of pornography or imbecility is, after all, a theatre that can yet find ways to unify its artists, its sponsors, and its audience in a celebration of their common, magnificent inheritance. It is, I think, mostly a matter of envisioning, from our standpoint within tradition, what to seek afresh—and then doing the seeking with honesty and acumen.



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